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SUBJECT: UN FOCUSES ON VIOLENCE AGAINST SAUDI WOMEN

REF: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION DAVID RUNDELL FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1.(U) SUMMARY: Professor Yakin Erturk, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, shared the preliminary results of her ten-day research on violence against women and its causes and consequences in the KSA. Erturk said she is amazed by the extent to which Saudi women have progressed. However, she also expressed concern about "horrible" cases of family violence in the country. Her initial assessment is that Saudi Arabia must create laws to protect women from violence and also allow them to play a bigger role in society and the workplace. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2.(U) Professor Yakin Erturk, a professor of sociology at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, has been the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on violence against women since 2003. In this capacity, she has visited 15 countries before coming to Saudi Arabia. Erturk was in the Kingdom at the invitation of the SAG. In January, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) criticized Saudi Arabia calling for ending the male guardianship system immediately. CEDAW also reported that women in the Kingdom are victims of systematic and pervasive discrimination across all aspects of life.

13. (U) At a February 13 press conference in Riyadh, Erturk outlined her observations of Saudi Arabia. She had just spent ten days in the Kingdom, meeting with government officials in Riyadh, Buraidah, Jeddah, and Dammam to assess the status women in Saudi Arabia. To validate her findings, Erturk also visited a shelter for abused women in Jeddah, the Female Protection House, and met separately with each resident. Erturk, who had studied in Riyadh 20 years ago, said she is amazed by the extent to which Saudi women have progressed. She told Al-Watan Arabic daily: "The Saudi woman has become a teacher, doctor, dean faculty, and businessperson. There is no comparison between her status in the past and the present."

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

14. (U) Despite the progress of Saudi women Erturk expressed concern about "horrible" cases of family violence in the country. She remarked that while some Saudi women she met expressed satisfaction with their lives, "others have raised concerns of serious levels of discriminatory practices against women that compromise their rights and dignity as full human beings." Many of Erturk's interlocutors complained about the serious discrimination and abuses against women from the religious police (Muttawa).

¶15. (U) Erturk said Saudi Arabia,s system of male guardianship for women limits women,s freedom of movement and ability to act in a whole range of family and social areas. She further explained that the lack of written laws governing private life constitutes a major obstacle to women,s access to justice and prevent many women from escaping abusive environments. Erturk also raised the issue of the driving ban for women during her talks, but stated that while it is a serious issue, she did not think there is a specific timeframe for solving this issue. Erturk noted that enabling women to drive would give them freedom to move and work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

¶16. (U) Erturk believes Saudi Arabia must create laws to protect women from violence and also allow women to play a bigger role in society and the workplace. She noted that the lack of women,s autonomy and economic independence is a primary reason for the level of violence against women in the Kingdom. She recommended the following as initial solutions:

a.) Judicial reforms to include a legal framework based on international human rights standards that would cover violence and family matters.

b.) Establishing a national mechanism for women that will intervene in cases of violence against them.

c.) Implementing positive action policies and plans to empower women.

d.) Organizing courses to educate society about the causative factors behind family upheavals.

e.) Establishing a mechanism for accessing divorce and the plight of women abandoned by their husbands.

f.) Provide training for police, health care providers, community leaders and others to show them that violence against women is both a violation of basic rights and incompatible with Muslim values.

¶17. (U) COMMENT. Erturk's report negatively portrayed the condition of women in Saudi Arabia. However, the SAG, Human Rights Commission (HRC), the National Society of Human Rights and unlicensed NGOs are implementing measures to address needs of abused women. According to the Saudi Gazette, the Experts Commission at the Council of Ministers is drafting legislation that will define child abuse, violence against women, and its penalties. The HRC is also requesting training on how to raise awareness of human rights abuses in country.END COMMENT.
FRAKER